Who Counts in Official Statistics? Ethical-Epistemic Issues in German Migration and the Collection of Racial or Ethnic Data

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ABSTRACT *In European countries (excluding the UK and Ireland), official statistics do not use racial or ethnic categories, but instead rely on proxies to collect data about discrimination. In the German microcensus, the proxy category adopted is 'migration background' (*Migrationshintergrund*): an individual has a 'migration background' when one or more of their parents does not have German citizenship by birth. We apply a coupled ethical-epistemic analysis to the 'migration background' category to illuminate how the epistemic issues contribute to ethical ones. Our central claim is that these ethical-epistemic issues with the 'migration background' category are best analysed in terms of Charles Mills's 'white ignorance'. Appealing to Annette Martín's structural account of white ignorance, we highlight the cyclical reinforcement of ignorance and racial injustice in the use of the 'migration background' variable. Colourblind eliminativism about race perpetuates the use of 'migration background', which sustains and intensifies racial injustices.*

1. Introduction

Racial and ethnic health disparities are consistently detected across national contexts. Recently, there have been calls from scholars to explain these racial health disparities in terms of social rather than biological factors, given mounting evidence suggesting the impact of racial inequalities on health and wellbeing.[1] For example, data on hospitalisation and mortality rates from various countries, including the US, the UK, Ireland, and Australia, reveal a disproportionate impact of the pandemic on negatively racialised populations due to pre-existing racialised socio-economic disadvantages and comorbidities.[2] This stark inequality shows the necessity of examining group-specific health outcomes and their causes to safeguard the lives and enhance the wellbeing of negatively racialised populations.

Arguably, to mitigate and prevent racial or ethnic discrimination, it is crucial to collect demographic data disaggregated by racial and ethnic categories in a way that is sensitive to the potential harms of such data collection.[3] Official statistics about various demographic groups compiled by governments are widely used to pursue anti-discrimination policies. The European Union (EU) recognises the significance of demographic data collection for upholding non-discrimination, a fundamental value of the EU.[4] A 2004 survey by the EU found that 93% of surveyed experts (including non-discrimination experts) concurred that data collection is vital for effective discrimination interventions and promoting

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equality.[5] Michaela Moua, the EU's first anti-racism coordinator, recently emphasised that 'collecting equality data broken down by racial or ethnic origin is crucial' to 'mak[e] the scale and nature of discrimination suffered by marginalised groups visible' and, consequently, 'makes it possible to create effective and targeted policies'.[6] Further calls for racial and ethnic data to monitor and reduce discrimination came from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2023.[7] Germany has failed to meet them. In 2022 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) published a follow-up report in which it concludes that Germany has not implemented the recommendation to investigate racial profiling by police authorities at the Federation and Federal State (*Bundesländer*) levels. Despite assessing two studies by the German Federation and Federal State to investigate police profiling, ECRI found 'no explicit references to racial profiling in either study'.[8]

Despite this broad consensus at the EU level, most member states are reluctant to collect demographic data disaggregated by racial or ethnic categories. In continental Europe, this reluctance stems from a societal taboo reflecting fears of failing to de-personalise the data, potentially exposing individual respondents to state access.[9] These fears are deeply rooted in the history of National Socialism, as it is widely believed that the selection, deportation, and extermination of its victims relied significantly on official demographic statistics.[10] Hence, even the collection of 'equality data' based on racial or ethnic categories remains a contentious issue.[11]

Moreover, the controversy over whether the term '*Rasse*' (the German cognate of 'race') should be removed from Article 3 of the German Basic Law (the German constitution) betrayed a deep-seated unease with the term.[12] As David Ludwig argues, due to 'the continued dominance of racialist associations with "Rasse"' and its association with the ideology of National Socialism, many Germans lean towards what one might call colourblind eliminativism.[13] Broadly, colourblindness refers to the principle that individuals should be treated solely as individuals, irrespective of their race ('the colour of their skin'). Hence, colourblind eliminativism posits that applying the concept of race to individuals – viewing them as 'raced' – violates this principle. Thus, it implies that the notion of race – and, consequently, any racial classification – is not only grounded in erroneous theories about human diversity but is inherently linked to racism. Therefore, to combat racism, it is necessary to abandon not only the racialist concept of race but any racial terminology.

Under the conditions of what Mathias Möschel termed 'Continental European Colourblindness', researchers investigating racial or ethnic discrimination resort to established proxy categories.[14] In Germany, the proxy category adopted is 'migration background' (*Migrationshintergrund*), officially recognised since 2005 when the German Federal Statistical Office began publishing data on the 'population with a migration background' based on the microcensus, a 1% mandatory household survey. The category is used by various government bodies, including the Federal Statistical Office and the Federal Ministries of the Interior and Justice. We focus on the definition provided by the German Federal Statistical Office in the 2016 microcensus. According to that standard definition: 'a person has a migrant background if he or she or at least one parent did not acquire German citizenship by birth'.[15] The state infers a person's migration background status from questions about immigration, citizenship, and naturalisation status, rather than being self-reported. This approach allows them to avoid the direct collection of

ethnic or racial data, while still contributing to discussions on differences and inequalities related to race or ethnicity.

While commonly used in research on concerns regarding (anti)discrimination, 'migration background' obscures racial discrimination experienced by German citizens of colour who do not meet the definition of migration background because both their parents are German by birth.[16] Thus, the 'migration background' category leads to *a racial data gap*. This fact has prompted the Black German organisation Each One Teach One e.V. to launch the 'Afrozensus' to make the case that gathering data concerning discrimination against Black Germans without a migration background is necessary.[17]

Since the mid-2010s, the 'migration background' category has increasingly come under scrutiny from social scientists and activists.[18] The debate over the term 'migration background' reached official bodies in 2021. The Conference of Ministers and Senators of the Federal States Responsible for Integration called for replacement of the category and agreed to use 'migration history' (*Migrationsgeschichte*) temporarily while discussions on suitable alternatives continue. The Independent Expert Commission on Integration Ability declared the 'migration background' category obsolete and recommended its replacement with 'immigrants and their direct descendants'.[19] However, as reflected in a recent debate hosted by the German Migration Council in 2022, there is still no consensus on replacement or complement categories, leaving the question of who counts in official statistics unresolved.[20]

In this article, we treat this question as a case of what Nancy Tuana termed 'coupled ethical-epistemic issues',[21] where epistemic inquiries are linked with researchers' ethical values or goals, such as promoting wellbeing.[22] While some sociologists have noted the ethical dimension of official statistics – the demographic data collected, categorised, and analysed by governments – relatively little has been said to clarify the coupling of ethical and epistemic dimensions.[23]

Our central claim is that the ethical-epistemic issues associated with the 'migration background' category in German official statistics are best analysed in terms of *ignorance*, specifically, Charles Mills's 'white ignorance'. We argue that the 'migration background' variable raises coupled ethical-epistemic problems because it systematically contributes to maintaining racial injustice.

2. Coupled Ethical-Epistemic Analysis

Categories used in scientific research are often both descriptive and evaluative, and, as such, have both epistemic and ethical implications. For example, when researchers examine the wellbeing of a population, they develop tools that not only characterise what counts as wellbeing for that group but also commit to normative claims related to what it means for things to go well for a person or which social positions are desirable.[24] As Alexandrova notes: 'definitions and measures of well-being require substantive and often controversial assumptions that are sometimes hidden behind apparently neutral and technical facts or avoided altogether'.[25] This is especially true when researchers investigate 'mixed' claims that are both descriptive and normative, such as 'Racial segregation in the US reduces the health and well-being of pre-term infants and families'.[26] We agree that category choice in data collection is frequently justified epistemically, though category choice often requires substantive moral assumptions.

Returning to decisions about categorisation and data collection in the context of health, constructs like 'wellbeing' and 'migration background' serve ethical purposes beyond just epistemic ones. Governments and non-governmental organisations are interested in tracking and intervening in phenomena described by both constructs. Some governments aim to determine which policies would best increase the populace's wellbeing.[27] Others wish to track the wellbeing of particular populations, for instance, by using 'migration background' to identify those with recent migration histories in Germany. These inquiries aim to assess how well migrants fare in their new country of residence and how quickly they integrate into society, which is associated with improvement in their wellbeing. The 'migration background' category is also used to evaluate the presence of health inequities for recent immigrants and their descendants. It is an accepted goal of public health research to reduce health inequities – health disparities between populations due to injustice.[28] Research has shown that migrant populations face disproportionate hurdles in accessing various resources and services, which have a specific detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing.[29] This form of injustice calls for effective countermeasures that mitigate the disparities in ways that address the specific needs of different population groups. Thus, data collection in public health serves both epistemic and ethical purposes, as data are needed to monitor where health inequities exist, by whom they are experienced, and to what extent. Data should also support interventions that address the injustice and its health effects. Such data must be disaggregated into categories of sub-populations and, in Germany, this often includes the 'migration background' category.

To ensure that data collection for official statistics serves its ethical and epistemic goals, the choice of variables concerning demographic groups must be analysed according to their different ethical and epistemic features. When constructing an appropriate demographic variable (and collecting data using it), the 'coupled ethical-epistemic issues' it raises must be addressed.[30] Katikireddi and Valles provide a useful analytical tool for researchers to examine the ethical and epistemic features and their *interaction*: coupled ethical-epistemic analysis.[31] It has been applied to make explicit the ethical and epistemic features of categories used in public health, climate science, and environmental science.[32] It was developed as a tool for practitioners to illuminate 'value decisions embedded in research models and methods that go unquestioned and often unappreciated'.[33] By shining light on these unquestioned value decisions, it helps identify the ethical dimensions of variable choice and the coupled relationship between ethical and epistemic dimensions. It is not a procedure for determining the best course of action, though it may inform such decisions.

Katikireddi and Valles propose four questions for coupled ethical-epistemic analysis:[34]

(1) What are the chosen variables' strengths and weaknesses for evidence-gathering and analysis?
(2) What are the chosen variables' ethical strengths and weaknesses?
(3) How will the chosen variables' strengths and weaknesses for evidence-gathering and analysis affect ethical issues?
(4) How will the chosen variables' ethical strengths and weaknesses affect evidence-gathering and analysis?

Two points concerning these questions are worth highlighting. First, choosing categories that measure what they promise to measure is crucial, as failing to do so can have

significant epistemic and ethical implications. We assess this requirement in the use of the 'migration background' category in anti-discrimination data collection. Second, the last two questions emphasise that category choice can have ethical implications that impact the quality of data collected, including through the openness of various population groups to participating in research.

Consider the choice to exclude men who have sex with men (MSM) due to the small risk of HIV infection from blood donations.[35] Excluding the population of MSM constitutes an epistemic choice to frame the MSM variable as a 'good' proxy for increased HIV infection risk. That is, while it would be more accurate to screen all blood donations for HIV directly and exclude those donations that are positive, blood donated by the MSM population is treated as a placeholder for blood that has a high risk of carrying the virus and transmitting HIV to those who receive transfusions. This epistemic judgement is influenced by moral evaluations of risk of harm: the risk of HIV transmission via blood transfusion is taken to be sufficiently likely and sufficiently harmful. It also has ethical consequences, such as further stigmatising the MSM population as it reinforces the stereotype that the MSM population are sexually irresponsible and carriers of sexually transmitted diseases. Note that these stereotypes are both descriptive (in referencing sexual practices and population rates of infection) and normative (in connoting reactions of blame and disgust). The stereotype is reinforced by the use of the MSM variable as a proxy for a population with increased HIV infection, despite the fact that research has shown that many men who have sex with other men regularly test for HIV.[36]

3. Contextualising 'Migration Background'

To analyse the ethical-epistemic issues raised by the 'migration background' category, we first need to contextualise official statistical categories in general and the category of 'migration background' in particular. This involves examining their original purpose and current use in the presentation of census data.

It may seem evident that category variables in official statistics can be either epistemically adequate or inadequate. To appreciate the *ethically* relevant features of official statistics, it is helpful to consider *what we do* in the institutional practice of official statistics and *for which purposes*. Although censuses officially aim 'to provide accurate representations of national populations', censuses play a causal role in the construction of social groups and institutionalise existing social groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation.[37] Conducting a census constitutes an institutional *practice* that is often part of the state's infrastructure.[38] Together with population statistics, surveying has long been used to intervene on the parts of social reality represented. For instance, Michelle Murphy argues that population data collection has devalued and erased certain kinds of lives in the service of greater economic production.[39] Specifically, Murphy illustrates how surveys about family planning practices in Bangladesh generated demand for contraceptives that did not exist before.[40] Surveys and censuses affect how power is distributed in society by informing the demand for and allocation of resources. Category variables in official statistics allow for social coordination to the extent that they become codified and embedded in data collection practices.[41] Thus, as an institutional practice primarily embedded in the state's bureaucracy, official statistics and the categories they

employ significantly affect the lives, wellbeing, and opportunities of citizens and non-citizens of a given state.

Let us turn to the 'migration background' category in particular. While the exact origin of the term 'migration background' remains somewhat unclear, its first use is commonly attributed to the German educationist Ursula Boos-Nünning in the 1998 Children and Youth Report.[42] However, as Will and Oğuzhan point out, it is neither defined nor operationalised there.[43] This changed in the 2005 microcensus when the category was first operationalised using five 'questions on migration':[44]

(1) Were you born on the current territory of the Federal Republic of Germany? Yes/No
(2) When did you move (or return) to the current territory of the Federal Republic of Germany? 1949 or earlier, year of immigration?
(3) Do you possess German citizenship? Yes, only German citizenship/Yes, German and at least one other citizenship/No
(4) Which foreign citizenship(s) do you possess? 1st citizenship/2nd citizenship (according to coding list)
(5) Do you possess German citizenship as a result of naturalisation? Yes/No

As a household survey, information about children and parents is available. Later, information about parents was asked for directly by the survey. Thus, 'migration background' can be inferred from these five questions and information about parents.

To understand the significance of this inclusion, first consider the treatment of migration in the microcensus prior to 2005. The microcensus is the largest representative survey in Germany, based on the Microcensus Act. It has been conducted annually since 1957 by the Federal Statistical Office to collect data on the population and the labour market. It surveys around 1% of the population in Germany on socio-demographics, including age, sex, marital status, household composition, education, income, housing situation, and health status.

Questions on immigration have been included in the microcensus from its inception, as a large number of immigrants with German citizenship had already been living since the Second World War in the territory that would later become the Federal Republic.[45] Most had immigrated as refugees, displaced persons, and, from 1953, as (late) ethnic German repatriates who emigrated to Germany before or after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Until the 1990s, immigrant groups were represented in the microcensus by recording displaced person or refugee status, place of origin, and nationality.[46]

However, this practice eroded at the turn of the millennium due to a crucial reform of German citizenship law concerning the distinction between citizens and foreigners based on the principle of descent (*ius sanguinis*) instituted in 1913.[47] According to this principle, Germans pass on their citizenship to their descendants – thus, children of foreigners are excluded from German citizenship by birth. This principle was increasingly challenged from the 1980s onwards as the integration of labour migrants in Germany increased.[48] In response, a limited principle of place of birth (*ius soli*) was added to the citizenship law to make naturalisation more accessible to non-citizens in 2000.[49] It also allowed those born in Germany to obtain German citizenship, provided that at least one parent had a permanent residence permit and had been legally residing in Germany for at least eight years.[50] It became possible for the children of migrant workers with German citizenship

to be born as German citizens. Thus, the category of 'Germans' now included not only naturalised foreigners and (late) repatriates but also German-born children of foreigners, while the category of 'foreigners' included many natives, due to the citizenship of their parents.[51]

Changes to German citizenship law were the most important developments leading to the amendment of the Microcensus Act. This meant that the distinction between German and foreign citizenship no longer tracked whether someone had immigrated, since there were both 'German' immigrants and 'foreign' natives.[52] Thus, due to their German citizenship, both naturalised citizens and (late) repatriates could not be represented as immigrants in the microcensus.[53] Will identifies two further developments throughout the 1990s concerning migration research in Germany that contributed to rendering the distinction between citizens and foreigners unsuited for its purposes.[54] First, interest in so-called second-generation and family integration histories increased. Second, international comparisons, which required distinguishing between foreign-born and native-born citizens, became increasingly important. However, the distinction between citizens and foreigners fails to track either of these dimensions.

This led both policy advisors and migration researchers to call for the replacement of the citizen/foreigner dichotomy with more fine-grained categories. These would make it possible to capture differences in socio-economic outcomes between foreigners and naturalised citizens and to track impacts on their descendants.[55] In 2005 the Microcensus Act was amended to collect further information on the migration status of respondents and their parents using the five 'questions on migration' above. This information determines each respondent's migrant background, rather than relying on self-identification. Recall that a person with a migration background has at least one parent without German nationality by birth.[56] This definition includes people whose parents have gained German citizenship by other means. For example, a white person who has German citizenship, is fluent in German, and has lived their whole life in Germany may count as having a 'migration background' because one of their parents was born in (and has citizenship in) Sweden. By contrast, a Black German citizen whose parents were both born in Germany (and who thus have German citizenship) would not count as having a 'migration background'.

Thus, the immediate aim of including the migration category variable in the microcensus was to represent German repatriates as well as naturalised citizens and second-generation immigrants as such. However, as Will points out, the reason given in the amended microcensus law only appeals to the need to collect information on naturalised citizens and second-generation migrants, not repatriates. It reflects the growing political importance of the integration of the former into German society. Particularly because naturalisation was taken to be tantamount to formal integration, such information was taken to be necessary to examine the willingness of migrants to integrate.[57]

However, as several migration researchers point out, this is not the only aim that they have pursued with the category 'migration background'.[58] In the absence of alternative categories based on self-identification, migration background also serves as a proxy category for ethnic and racial discrimination.[59] It is used in health contexts to examine racial/ethnic disparities, despite not being designed to do so.[60] Further, the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Construction, and Community expressed its commitment to make the collection of data based on migration background a permanent practice. Crucially, it presents this as part of its efforts against discrimination and racism, as outlined in the 'Action Plan

of the Cabinet Committee to Combat Right-Wing Extremism and Racism'.[61] As Will points out, using the migration background in this way assumes that it tracks ethnicity and race.[62] This aim will play a central role in our discussion of the coupled ethical-epistemic issues of the migration background category.

In the following section, we summarise some ethical and epistemic issues identified in the scholarly and public debate over the 'migration background' variable. Against this background, we can then analyse the coupling of these issues in terms of white ignorance.

4.   Epistemic and Ethical Features of the 'Migration Background' Variable

First, we address two epistemic issues of the 'migration background' variable highlighted by social scientists, specifically under- and over-inclusion. Then we turn to the ethical issue they raise, namely, its unsuitability for investigating racial discrimination. Finally, we consider its potential epistemic and ethical strengths.

4.1.   *Under-Inclusion*

The current definition of the category only includes certain migration experiences and their impact on migrants and their descendants while excluding others. This under-inclusion is due to the definition of the 'migration background' category variable in terms of the citizenship of one's parents. Among the children of immigrants, this excludes those born to German parents. In using 'migration background' as a proxy for racialised minorities, this category importantly excludes members of those groups who have been born to German parents. As Will states, the migration background is 'still an "ethnic" rather than a migration category'.[63] It can be thought to draw a line between those who are considered German and those who are not. While it may seem a positive that many second-generation and later immigrants from racialised minorities will not have a 'migration background', it is not necessarily the case that these groups are automatically seen to be German. Although the category of 'people without a migration background' exists, it is rarely used to represent data from the microcensus. Will suggests that this omission is due to the identification of the category with that of 'standard Germans', which need not be separately marked as a demographic group. The contrast in public representations of 'those with a migration background' and the cultural schema for 'standard Germans' leaves this group invisible.

4.2.   *Over-Inclusion*

While the category *under*-includes some groups, it also *over*-includes others: it lumps together individuals and their descendants whose migration experiences and life situations differ vastly. First, including first-generation, second-generation, and, partially, third-generation (post-)migrants conflicts with theories of migration that predict 'an ongoing adaptation of immigrants from one generation to the next'.[64] Second, a category that includes both children with only one German-born parent and children with two foreign-born parents implies that these groups are more similar to each other than to children with two German-born parents. However, this implication conflicts with evidence that, at least in the context of education, students with one foreign-born parent 'perform similarly

to native students'.[65] According to Will, this way of categorising students violates the rule of similarity.[66] Put differently, it does not adequately track those causal structures affecting students' educational attainment by which we view them as similar: having a single foreign-born parent has less detrimental causal impact on students' performance than having parents who are both foreign-born. Third, as Will puts it, both 'migration background' and its complement are 'a state-administered ethnic category' determined solely by parental citizenship.[67] In her view, the fourfold categorisation of people based on their birthplace (inside or outside current German borders) and their citizenship (German or non-German) provided by the Federal Statistical Office, even if further broken down in terms of geographical and national origin, cannot accommodate relevant differences within each group.[68] Finally, persons with a migration background who possess German citizenship are 'excluded from the category "German" within statistical representation' despite comprising more than half of those with a migration background.[69] Thus, both categories are heterogeneous but relevant differences within those populations are obscured. These epistemic differences become relevant concerning particular ethical goals.

4.3.   Unsuitability for Investigating Racial Discrimination

What are the relevant ethical features of the 'migration background' variable? It is generally unsuitable for gathering the evidence required for determining anti-discrimination measures. Will argues it considers 'only bureaucratic facts such as (former) citizenship (s) and resettler status, not the lived experience or self-identification of the respondents'.[70] Moreover, both 'people with' and 'people without a migration background' are specifically unsuitable for gathering the evidence required for anti-discrimination measures because this does not track how they are differently impacted by racialisation. Further, it underestimates the amount of discrimination some individuals 'with a migration background' face because they are lumped together with more privileged groups. Other official statistics decisions, such as the US Census allowing multiracial classification, have supported very inclusive categories for the enforcement of anti-discrimination law, namely, by assigning all self-reporting mixed race individuals to a non-white category. However, this strategy is undermined by the extent to which the migration category fails to adequately capture even the 'potentially discriminated-against population'.[71]

The variable's general and specific unsuitability is only relative to the egalitarian goal of tackling racial discrimination. In light of this goal, the 'exclusionary effects' of both 'people with a migration background' and 'people without a migration background' indirectly become ethically relevant. For instance, building on Dvora Yanow's critical discussion of US census categories, Will raises the concern that assuming that differences within groups are smaller than they actually are within a heterogeneous statistical category can lead to those better-off benefiting to a greater extent from equal opportunities measures than those worse-off and thus in greater need.[72]

4.4.   Strengths

There are few strengths of the 'migration background' category as currently defined. Some researchers claim it helps identify structural inequalities that are correlated with migration, particularly in the German education system.[73] However, this possible

strength is greatly diminished once we consider that the effect attributed to migration decreases, if not disappears, when controlling for socio-economic status.[74] The causes of observed differences are debated; for example, it could be having a migration background together with low socio-economic status or discrimination against specific subgroups within migration background.[75] Thus, its role in providing causal explanations of structural inequalities is mixed.

There may also be ethical strengths in not collecting official statistics concerning racialisation or ethnicity and instead relying on a proxy variable. First, the microcensus is mandatory and the ability to opt out of questions about racialisation may not be meaningfully available. Second, the historic harms of governmental use of demographic statistics, during the Holocaust or against specific populations like Roma populations, may justify concerns about the threat of future harms, especially as far-right politicians gain further power. Finally, as '*Rasse*' indicates racialist understandings of race (that is, biological essentialism), if it were to be used, it risks reification and the promotion of racism.[76] However, we think this risk may be reduced or mitigated were other ways of collecting racialisation data available.

Overall, we conclude that the epistemic and ethical weaknesses of the 'migration background' category and its use outweigh its strengths. To understand how the 'migration background' variable's epistemic and ethical features are coupled, we will analyse the use of the category in terms of white ignorance.

5.   Racial Data Gaps as White Ignorance

As argued above, the 'migration background' category obscures forms of discrimination that coincide with the racialisation of some groups that do not meet its definition. This leads to data gaps that become ethical issues when governments solely rely on this category to collect official data on discrimination faced by specific racialised groups, regardless of their or their parents' nationality. Without official data stratified by racialised groups, governments are ill-equipped to address (or even acknowledge) the discrimination these groups face.

In this section, we examine how the epistemic and ethical issues are coupled. We invoke the concept of white ignorance to capture how racial data gaps are created by the 'migration background' variable and how these data gaps perpetuate racial injustice. Specifically, we draw on the account of 'white ignorance' introduced by Charles Mills and developed in Annette Martín's structuralist account.[77]

Mills characterises white ignorance in terms of the absence of true belief or presence of false belief resulting from a 'structural group-based miscognition' that is 'not contingent' but caused by 'white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications'.[78] White people have 'motivational group interest' in preserving the status quo in racial matters, and the benefits it affords them act as a flawed socio-psychological mechanism.[79] This characterisation aligns with what Annette Martín terms the 'cognitivist view' of white ignorance.[80] On this view, white ignorance usually stems from flawed cognitive processes shaped by an epistemic agent's position within a racialised social structure.

However, white ignorance need not be understood solely in terms of flawed cognitive processes. This understanding would be too restrictive to account for cases where agents are ignorant due to 'upstream processes of historical erasure', such as through curating

their school and university curricula.[81] In such cases, the agents in question would struggle to access pertinent information about racial injustice, even if their social position did not directly influence their cognition.

Martín proposes a structuralist view that encompasses various processes leading to white ignorance, including those shaping cognition and existing historical erasure. Here 'white ignorance' refers to ignorance that satisfies two conditions. First, it 'systematically arises as part of some social structural process(es) that systematically gives rise to racial injustice'.[82] In Martín's account, the processes are structural because they each play a causal role in a social system of racialised oppression. What typically gives rise to ignorance are other *social practices* also playing a role in that system, such as educational or official statistical categories and census practices. The second criterion holds that ignorance 'is not an incidental by-product of these processes, but is rather an active player in them'.[83] This criterion captures Mills's idea that white ignorance actively 'resists' and 'fights back'.[84] Finally, we can describe Martín's account in functionalist terms, that is, in terms of its causal role in a system of racialised oppression. On this account, for a doxastic state to be an instance of white ignorance, it must be 'an active player' in perpetuating racial injustice.[85] Therefore, white ignorance does not depend on any particular flawed mechanism giving rise to it. Instead, what matters is its function.

We interpret the first criterion according to the coupled ethical-epistemic analysis as requiring the presence of a causal feedback loop between ignorance and racial injustice. That is, white ignorance not only contributes to perpetuating a social system's racially unjust structure but also is a part of that social system that systematically arises because of its racially unjust structure. To understand how the epistemic and the ethical are coupled, it is helpful to distinguish causal and conceptual interactions.[86] In some cases, ethical features cause the epistemic features (or vice versa), such as when stigmatisation and empirically unsubstantiated discriminatory policies towards a population result in avoidance of testing and intervention in medical institutions, thereby diminishing the epistemic quality of data available to those institutions. In others, the ethical-epistemic features are conceptually related. For example, researchers may adopt a methodology that explicitly excludes community participation when the community has a moral claim to participate. This methodological choice also has an ethical component in unfairly excluding the community.[87] White ignorance is, in our view, a matter of causal interaction insofar as it is both caused by and causes racial injustice.

We interpret the second criterion as being fulfilled in multiple ways. In part, it can be met with an explanation of the reinforcing nature of the causal feedback loop. Positive feedback loops can easily move systems away from their starting points; an initial input in one direction gets amplified by reinforcement through the iterations. As a metaphor for our case, the causal feedback loop not only maintains existing racial injustice but compounds and amplifies it. Similarly, Martín points to non-agential external barriers to protect white ignorance, such as institutional policies and informal practices.[88] Still, the second condition may also be met when 'erasure, disavowal, denial, obfuscation, idealisation, and mythologisation of facts about history, society, and individuals' concerning racialisation and racism promote racial injustice.[89] These epistemological distortions function to perpetuate racial oppression, even when it is challenged. According to the functionalist aspect of Martín's account, these phenomena, though in part cognitive mechanisms, are also white ignorance.

We can now present our coupled ethical-epistemic analysis of the 'migration background' variable in terms of white ignorance. First, we propose that the 'ideology of colourblindness' causally contributes to the formation and preservation of white ignorance.[90] Looking at the French case, Magali Bessone argues that colourblind eliminativism, as justified by a French republican sense of national identity and equality, contributes to white ignorance. The colourblind eliminativist view championed by the French left maintains racial injustice: by voting unanimously to remove the term 'race' from legislation, 'it deprives victims of racial discrimination from the legal norms and instruments to address it; it maintains white privilege'.[91] There are many striking similarities between the French and the German case, including efforts to remove the term 'race' (or its German cognate) from legislation.[92] German reluctance to gather data based on racial categories and instead reliance on proxy categories, such as migration background, is arguably due to a similar colourblind antiracism without the French republican justification.

The structural account particularly emphasises the importance of white ignorance's contribution to sustaining racial injustice. Demonstrating this sustaining influence amounts to meeting Martín's second criterion: that white ignorance is an active component of the system that perpetuates racial injustice. To illustrate the role of racial data gaps in perpetuating racial injustice, we focus on research into the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different racialised groups in Germany. Such disproportionate effects of the pandemic have recently been demonstrated in countries such as the UK and the US.[93] As international studies suggest, the heightened vulnerability of particular racial or ethnic groups is linked to their socio-economic status, encompassing factors like income and living conditions. Furthermore, this vulnerability is compounded by structural discrimination in areas like healthcare, housing, and employment. Members of certain racialised groups are commonly employed in public-facing and labour-intensive professions (e.g. manufacturing, service industries, slaughterhouses), putting them at increased risk of infection.

However, researchers investigating whether such structural inequalities and discrimination in the COVID-19 pandemic affect ethnic or racial groups in Germany (independent of their or their parents' nationality) face considerable obstacles in answering that question. In a recent study of different mortality rates connected with the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and Switzerland, sociologists Tino Plümecke, Linda Supik, and Anne-Kathrin Will attribute these difficulties to a lack of specific data concerning racialised groups.[94] As a result, they base their analysis on data concerning the mortality of persons with foreign citizenship and 'migration background'. They concede that their study can only determine the effects of racism and structural discrimination on health outcomes to a limited extent. At best, their data are consistent with racism negatively impacting on health outcomes: in Germany and Switzerland, foreign nationals died more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Germany, neighbourhoods and occupations in which people with a migration background are overrepresented had disproportionately higher mortality rates.[95] Thus, based on the categories of 'foreign national' and 'migration background' alone, whether structural racism led to worse health outcomes and higher mortality rates in Germany during the early COVID-19 pandemic cannot be known through analyses of official statistics, despite great loss being observed by medical professionals working in hospitals in 2020 and 2021.[96]

6. Conclusion

Our central claim has been that the ethical-epistemic issue associated with the 'migration background' category in German official statistics is best analysed in terms of white ignorance. First, we applied coupled ethical-epistemic analysis to the 'migration background' category. This analysis uncovered ethical-epistemic problems with its use as a proxy for race. In particular, 'migration background' as a heterogeneous variable obscures data that are needed for upholding the EU's anti-discrimination values. We argued that the structural account of white ignorance best accounts for this use of 'migration background'. We propose that its use in German official statistics is (at least in part) caused by colourblind reasoning and, in turn, it sustains and intensifies existing racial injustice. Viewing these official statistical practices as white ignorance highlights the cyclical reinforcement of ignorance and racial injustice.

Thus, a fundamental change in data collection and official statistics for anti-discriminatory purposes is warranted. It is crucial to overcome colourblind eliminativist approaches as they fail to adequately grasp the scale, patterns, and structural character of racial inequities. The current maintenance of colourblind approaches in official statistics is actively harmful in that it gives rise to white ignorance and, thus, maintains and sometimes strengthens racial injustice.

Black Germans have been particularly concerned with the lack of formal acknowledgement of and ignorance concerning their everyday experiences with racial discrimination such that one group organised and conducted a community-led census – the Afrozensus – that included self-identified demographics and self-reports of discriminatory experiences. The Afrozensus survey has generated concerning results, including 93% of participants reporting they were not believed when communicating experiences of discrimination in Germany and 65% of participants reporting experiences with discrimination in the German healthcare system.[97] Such community-led approaches employing self-report methods highlight the importance of surveys that account for the lived experiences of those adversely affected by racialisation. We take the community effort for its conduct and the severity of its findings to emphasise the need for systematic data collection supported by state infrastructure and resources. However, it also raises a separate question about the agency and position of the data subject in the data collection process. To effectively combat white ignorance and to track the interests of groups adversely affected by racialisation, any new approach to data collection should be led by experts from those groups and contribute to the elimination of racial discrimination.

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NOTES

1 Paradies, "Defining."
2 Hendl and Roxanne, "Digital Surveillance"; Chowkwanyun and Reed, "Racial Health Disparities"; Marmot *et al.*, "Build Back Fairer."
3 Lett *et al.*, "Conceptualizing."
4 Makkonen, *Measuring Discrimination*.
5 Ibid., 5.
6 Brzozowski, "EU's Anti-Racism Coordinator."
7 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Black*.
8 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, "ECRI Conclusions."
9 Supik, *Statistik und Rassismus*; Supik and Spielhaus, "Matters."
10 Möschel, *Law*.
11 Ibid., 92–6, 114f; Simon, "Failure."
12 Barskanmaz, *Recht und Rassismus*; Liebscher, *Rasse im Recht*.
13 Bessone, "Racism"; Ludwig, "How Race Travels," 2738, 2740.
14 Möschel, *Law*, 118.
15 Statistisches Bundesamt, "Bevölkerung," 4.
16 Aikins *et al.*, "Afrozensus 2020."
17 Ibid.
18 Will, "10 Jahre"; Will, "German Statistical Category"; Horvath, "Migration Background"; Aikins *et al.*, "Afrozensus 2020."
19 Fachkommission Integrationsfähigkeit, *Gemeinsam*, 222.
20 Will, "Anstelle."
21 Tuana, "Embedding Philosophers."
22 Katikireddi and Valles, "Coupled Ethical–Epistemic Analysis."
23 Espeland and Stevens, "Sociology"; Desrosières, *Politics*.
24 Alexandrova, *Philosophy*.
25 Ibid., xv.
26 Beck *et al.*, "Color of Health."
27 Alexandrova, *Philosophy*.
28 Katikireddi and Valles, "Coupled Ethical–Epistemic Analysis."
29 Bozorgmehr *et al.*, "What Is the Evidence"; Juárez *et al.*, "Effects."
30 Tuana, "Embedding Philosophers," 1937.
31 Katikireddi and Valles, "Coupled Ethical–Epistemic Analysis."
32 Ibid.; Valles *et al.*, "Coupled Ethical–Epistemic Analysis"; Vezér *et al.*, "Epistemic and Ethical Trade-Offs."
33 Tuana, "Embedding Philosophers."
34 Katikireddi and Valles, "Coupled Ethical–Epistemic Analysis," e40.
35 Ibid.
36 Nwokolo *et al.*, "Rapidly Declining HIV"; Witzel *et al.*, "HIV Testing."

37 Espeland and Stevens, "Sociology"; Desrosières, *Politics*.
38 Porter, *Trust*.
39 Murphy, *Economization*, 41.
40 Ibid., 66–8.
41 Porter, *Trust*; Haslanger, "Culture and Critique"; Haslanger, "What Is a Social Practice?"; James, "Nachwort."
42 Will, "10 Jahre," 14.
43 Will, "German Statistical Category"; Oğuzhan, "Das Ende," 74.
44 Statistisches Bundesamt, "Bevölkerung 2005."
45 Will, "10 Jahre," 10.
46 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Arbeitsunterlagen*, 9.
47 Will, "German Statistical Category," 540; Oğuzhan, "Das Ende," 73.
48 Oğuzhan, "Das Ende." 73.
49 Ibid.
50 Michalowski, "Staatsangehörigkeit."
51 Will, "German Statistical Category," 540 f.
52 Ibid., 541.
53 Will, "10 Jahre." 10.
54 Ibid.
55 Unabhängige Kommission, *Zuwanderung Gestalten*.
56 Statistisches Bundesamt, "Bevölkerung 2021," 5.
57 Deutscher Bundestag, "Entwurf," 11; Will, "German Statistical Category," 543.
58 Oğuzhan, "Das Ende"; Will, "Challenging Knowledge."
59 El-Mafaalani, "Diskriminierung."
60 Schenk, "Migration und Gesundheit"; Lewicki, *Sind Menschen*.
61 Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, "Maßnahmenkatalog," 3 (measure 7).
62 Will, "Challenging Knowledge," 8.
63 Will, "German Statistical Category," 550.
64 Ibid., 551; Esser and Friedrichs, *Generation und Identität*; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*.
65 OECD, "Where Immigrant Students Succeed."
66 Will, "German Statistical Category," 552.
67 Ibid., 552.
68 Ibid., 553; Yanow, *Constructing*, 146f.
69 Will, "German Statistical Category," 550, 544.
70 Ibid., 552.
71 Morning, "Multiracial Classification," 9.
72 Will, "German Statistical Category," 553; Yanow, *Constructing*, 146f.
73 Oğuzhan, "Das Ende." 78.
74 Ibid., 79.
75 El-Mafaalani, "Diskriminierung," 470f.
76 Supik, *Statistik und Rassismus*.
77 Mills, "White Ignorance"; Mills, *Racial Contract*; Mills, "Global White Ignorance"; Martín, "What Is White Ignorance?"
78 Mills, "White Ignorance," 13, 15, 23, 20; Mills, "Global White Ignorance," 217.
79 Mills, "White Ignorance," 23.
80 Martín, "What Is White Ignorance?," 872. Here we set aside the question of whether Mills's view is adequately captured by the cognitivist view (see Bain, "Mills's Account"). Instead, we take Martín's view to be adaptable to include the phenomena emphasised by cognitivist views.
81 Martín, "What Is White Ignorance?," 874.
82 Ibid., 875.
83 Ibid., 875.
84 Mills, "White Ignorance," 13.
85 On the functionalist reading of Martín's account, white ignorance allows for *multiple realisation* by different formal and informal practices, so long as those practices have the right causal role, namely, perpetuating racial injustice.
86 Valles *et al.*, "Coupled Ethical-Epistemic Analysis."
87 Ibid.

88 Martín, "What Is White Ignorance?," 23.
89 Bain, "Mills's Account," 21.
90 Mills, "White Ignorance"; Medina, "Color Blindness."
91 Bessone, "Racism," 821.
92 Roig, "Uttering 'Race'"; Möschel, *Law*.
93 Chowkwanyun and Reed, "Racial Health Disparities."
94 Plümecke *et al.*, "Rassismus der Pandemie."
95 Lewicki, *Sind Menschen*.
96 "Coronavirus."
97 Aikins *et al.*, "Afrozensus 2020."

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